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CHANGING SCALES AND THE SCALES OF CHANGE: ETHNOGRAPHY AND POLITICAL ECONOMY IN ANTOFAGASTA, CHILE

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Abstract. This article is an elucidation of what anthropology can say about social and economic change, and about its relationship to political economy at large. I locate the argument within the recent debate about ‘modernity’ in anthropology, because of the debate’s conspicuousness, and because of its concern with describing and analysing ‘change’. The argument is based on an ethnographic and institutional analysis of urban change in the city of Antofagasta, Chile, focusing particularly on a series of recent local proposals for economic and urban regeneration. The material is used to illustrate the many different ‘scales’ through which projects of ‘modernity’ are put to work and understood in Antofagasta. This is used to argue that the concept of ‘modernity’ is of little use save as a heuristic term, and to suggest that we should look instead to the kinds of complex connections that different orders of analysis afford. Ethnography has its own scale, which participates in, but does not exhaust, the order of political economy.

Recent anthropological attempts at tackling the question of modernity have focused on the way in which the concept is made to work analytically, or on its different alleged qualities: a particular attitude towards temporality (Miller 1994); a rhythmic alternation of ‘advancement’ and ‘decline’ (Ferguson 1999); an emphasis on its cultural and

disjuncted moments (Appadurai 1996); its ‘alternativeness’ – ‘the ways modernity refracts through different cultural and contextual guises’ (Knauf 2002: 22); and on the very scale (particular vs. wider context, the local vs. the global) of the ‘modernity’ metanarrative to which all such views finally succumb (Englund & Leach 2000).

From a different angle, it is relatively safe to suggest that most such views focus on the rupture with the past that the advent of modernity announces (Koselleck 1985). This moment of rupture is generally represented in terms of historical consciousness, an ethos inflected by the ‘before-and-after’ of the modern passage (Foucault 1984: 39). These experiences of dis/continuity have led some scholars to lose sight of the concomitant changes in the organization of knowledge that modernity brought with it, or that it labelled. Seen in this light, modernity is less about change than about the ways in which reorganized bodies of knowledge made ‘change’ a matter of interest. It is about the changes in knowledge that brought questions of ‘change’ to the forefront of intellectual concern.

Following this lead, this article takes issue with the concept of modernity and its analytical purchase in anthropology. I use the recent debate about modernity in anthropology to rethink how anthropology can engage with questions of ‘change’. I think around modernity to think through anthropology’s analytic of a changing world. The article argues that modernity is best understood as a heuristic concept to think about the changing and complex articulations between different orders of knowledge. No two places, however, undergo the same kind of change, and the very notion of change itself is something that means different things to different people. This is why the article further argues that moments of ‘change’ are best viewed in terms of the overlapping ‘scales’

(historical, environmental, political, economic, etc.) of meaning and action that people deploy to engage with their present, and to assess the consequences of such engagement. Scales are defined and deployed *locally*, and consequences evince in the specific articulations between different scales of meaning. A word is in order about my use of the term ‘scale’.

I take inspiration for my use of the concept of scale from the work of Marilyn Strathern (e.g. Strathern 1991; Strathern 1999). The idea of scale has two dimensions: *scale as magnitude*, where actions are measured in terms of the scale of their effects, e.g. how ‘global’ is global and how ‘local’ is local?, what is the remit of ‘regional’ social policy? (Cf. Herod & Wright 2002); and *scales as orders of knowledge*, where particular orders of relations (of economy, or religion, kinship, etc.) are mobilised and measured up against other scales, e.g. what image of the ‘family’ is conjured when thinking about ‘the miner’ as an emblem of ‘modernity’? (These examples are further elaborated later on in the article.) So the scale of a change (i.e. its magnitudinal effect) can be pre-eminently *economic*, even if it came about from conjuring *historical* orders of knowledge. This is, for instance, the work of the ideological project of Antofagasta’s ‘mining destiny’: a scale that conjures up historical and cultural narratives to bring about economic effects. The image, then, is that of an Archimedian balance: the weight of one order translates into the effects of another order. The project of anthropology is then that of elucidating which – and how – ideas are routed to specific domains and effects: how a set of values (about the historical worth of mining, for instance) acquire a particular scale of relevance (say, as a narrative about national identity). The work of scales is thus at once knowledge-based

and consequential. Ethnography, too, works within its own scale: it conjures an order of knowledge that carries forth its own effects.

Building on this conceptual apparatus, I argue that the notion of modernity articulates complex connections between, within and across scales. A similar argument has recently been made by Harry Englund and James Leach, who would like to see modernity as a reflexive project worked out *ethnographically* (by the anthropologist), rather than an analytical scale imposed from above by the social theorist:

The issue of scale is critical... Anthropologists writing about modernity are often highly aware of scale, but their claims to control analytical scales – in references to “larger-scale perspectives” or “wider contexts” – bypass valuable and still underdeveloped knowledge practices in ethnography. They do so by organizing their ethnography in a meta-narrative which makes shifts in scale look natural. (Englund & Leach 2000: 226)

Like Englund and Leach I argue for a view of modernity as a local project in the scaling out of social relationships. But I further suggest that ethnography is only one scale through which this project works itself out; or rather, that the scale of modernity accommodates ethnography in a complex articulation with other scales (Cf. Law & Mol 2002). Which is why the term ‘modernity’ has proved so slippery to anthropological analysis. If modernity is to tell us anything about social change, its analytical purchase begins with its very use: It is not what modernity *explains* but the kind of sociality that it *enables* that is of interest to anthropology.

An adequate analysis of modernity has to work out the scale of ethnography in the order of political economy, and to further elucidate its connection to other scales.¹ The scale of modernity is worked out in a complex articulation of multiple other scales (or orders of knowledge), and it is to such proportional relationships that we should turn our attention. It is this complex configuration, and not modernity per se, that we have to figure out. This article is an account of one such set of complex connections as they relate to the experience of urban change in the city of Antofagasta, Chile.

Throughout the 1990s, urban change in Antofagasta became articulated in the form of a historical project, a project that realized aspirations of modernity and identity, where both ‘modernity’ and ‘identity’ mobilized their own fields of meaning, and where such mobilizations finally emerged in the consequential idioms of consumption and a ‘mining destiny’ for the city. Modernity became variously articulated in different scales, and became a scale of sorts itself. It articulated and gave expression to a wide array of orders of knowledge and bodies of effects: as an idiom that people employed to measure degrees of capital investment; an indication of the effectiveness and the kind of work done by ‘culture’ and ‘history’; a metaphor for understanding the political geography of the nation (centralisation vs. decentralisation) and the region’s contribution to the nation-building project; and an ideology of family values and relationships.

The article, in sum, illustrates why the idea of modernity (and similar other descriptors of ‘real orders’, like globalisation) is a problematic one, and argues for its reconceptualisation in terms of ‘scale’. In this view, modernity may be understood as the outcome of a particularly complex configuration of scales, and of its consequences. The argument itself unfolds along three classic ‘scales’ of academic analysis: political

economy, cultural economy, and culture. Ethnography appears and disappears, in various proportions and effects, at each level of analysis, and in this fashion charts the scale of its own analytic possibilities.

Political economy: the ‘world’s mining capital’

‘The World’s Mining Capital’ is the catch phrase with which Antofagasta’s local authorities publicise the city in travellers’ guides and tourist agencies’ brochures.

Whether or not Antofagasta is the world’s most important mining enclave the truth is that the city, insofar as it is the capital to a region that contributed alone 28.3 per cent of the country’s exports in the first quarter of 2004 (www.ine.cl), can be with no doubt regarded, in Saskia Sassen’s terminology, a ‘world city’ (Sassen 1994). Economically, the region’s performance stands unparalleled in the country at large, its growth and productivity indicators consistently outdoing those for the rest of the country in most areas. Only the Metropolitan Region, to which Santiago is capital, has a higher growth rate than Antofagasta.

The worldwide significance of the mining operations located in Antofagasta has meant that the region has become an important target for foreign investors. Between 1990 and 1996 the region attracted US\$3,342 million of foreign investment, 25.8 per cent of the country’s total. In one way or another, most investments are related to the mining activities, whether directly, through the enlargement of existing extractive operations or the development of new plants, or indirectly, via the construction of regional energy terminals (natural gas and electricity plants) aimed at cutting down the cost of supplying power to the industry.

The region's future plans for development, and the associated investment packages which those projects would bring, have recently situated Antofagasta under the spotlight of various national and international lobbying and financial groups' interests, the most important of which is a plan for the construction of a *megapuerto* ('mega-harbour') in the bay of Mejillones, 68km north of Antofagasta. The new harbour has been hailed as what will be South America's greatest Pacific port and its construction and opening are expected to realign dramatically the region's spatial economics and social geography. (Phase One of the megapuerto opened on 28 November 2003.)

The construction of the *megapuerto* complex at Mejillones is estimated to cost some US\$800 million. The scale of the project increases if one takes into account the associated investment packages that the project will attract. The massive energy requirements of the industrial operations that will eventually develop in the area will need to be catered for. A plan for the development of three large-scale continental energy supply projects has therefore been envisaged. These are: (i) the Atacama Gas Project, a gas pipeline which will stretch for 928km linking Campo Durán in Jujuy, Argentina, to Mejillones, with an estimated US\$650 million cost; (ii) the Norgas Project, another gas pipeline which will run for 880km connecting Tartagal in Salta, Argentina, to Tocopilla and, eventually, Mejillones, for an estimated cost of US\$400 million, and; (iii) the Chilgener Project, considering the construction of three thermoelectric plants in Argentinean soil which will then be connected to the Sistema Interconectado del Norte Grande (the Great North's Interconnected Energy System) for a total of US\$440 million.

The portfolio of investments that has clustered around the *megapuerto* initiative has been zealously looked after and defended by the local industrialists' association

(Asociación de Industriales de Antofagasta, AIA), against, for instance, the mayor of Iquique, capital city to the Tarapaca Region and 600km north from Antofagasta, and once posited as an alternative site for the construction of the harbour. The industrialists' lobbying group is deeply involved in and committed to redrawing the city's geography of use and exchange values, since the shift of all heavy industrial operations to Mejillones will change the role that Antofagasta shall henceforth play as the region's capital.² The industrialists' vision of the region's future economic geography, in line with that of the Town Hall, envisages Antofagasta as a predominantly residential and service centre. In May 1999 I interviewed the then president of the AIA, who spelt out the particularities of such a vision for me: 'We need to make Antofagasta a more livable city... to equip it with hospitable infrastructure.... to make the city 'presentable' and a place that will not expel people from it'. He further argued that if the city is to benefit from its confirmation as Northern Chile's main service and financial centre it will also need to 'assume its mining destiny'. Antofagasta is a mining city and will not 'cease to be so for the next one hundred years'. As a service centre of international import, however, Antofagasta needs to recast and reformulate its association to the mining industry, for 'there can be mining without minerals'. Antofagasta's future depends on the city being capable of projecting itself as 'a mining industry meeting-centre; an international renowned enclave for mining science and technology; a mining technology and science park'.

The AIA has already taken steps toward the consolidation of such a vision through the organization of Exponor, a biannual international fair dedicated to the mining industry based in Antofagasta. In 1997, 1999 and 2001 the fair generated an average of \$100 million worth of business for its exhibitionists, and in November 2003, for its tenth

anniversary, the event received official recognition of its status as an ‘international fair’. Moreover, from 1995, Exponor took over the organisation of the Jornadas de Integración Minera de América del Sur (Conference for the Mining Integration of South America), an event that brings together government and private sector officials from Argentina, Chile, Peru and Bolivia with a view to opening up a transnational regulatory and market space for the mining industry.

The industrialists’ vision is shared by the Town Hall in its plans for the city’s future development. In 1998 the city’s plan for communal development (*Plan de Desarrollo Comunal*) spoke of ‘consolidating Antofagasta as the greatest city in South America’s midwest macroregion’. The set of specific objectives through which this was to be achieved included: (i) ‘consolidating the urban littoral as the city’s principal public and recreational space’; (ii) ‘the articulation of new urban centres’; (iii) ‘revitalizing the old city’ (a measure which appears to stand in opposition to no. (ii) above); (iv) ‘improving the deficit of green areas’, which involves ‘changing the policy from one of providing small green areas to one of the creation of communal-scale urban parks at specific points across its plan’; (v) a move toward ‘densification’: from 74 inhabitants per hectare to 100; (vi) realigning the industrial zone into an industrial corridor; (vii) restructuring the city’s space to enable the Mejillones-Antofagasta axis to grow out to become a ‘harbour-city’: planning and providing for ‘dry harbours, warehouses, freight transport systems, control areas, fair parks, etc.’ (1998: 8, 11). These proposals are all aimed at opening up the city’s space: by promoting ‘densification’ and large scale city parks; by focusing on axes and corridors of movement as target areas and calling for the creation of new urban centres.

Perhaps the most interesting of the proposals which the new plan introduced regards the administrative restructuring of the city's space through its partitioning into eight *unidades territoriales* (territorial units), a figure which contrasts sharply with the 78 *unidades vecinales* (neighbourhood units) into which the city is currently divided. The idea behind the proposal is to provide a territorial framework where both 'permanent' (e.g. neighbourhood committees) and 'flexible' community organizations can be institutionalised (no clear examples are given; only loosely the document refers to 'grassroot economic organizations and sports organizations'). In this sense, the language of flexibility of the proposal echoes the models of flexible accumulation into which contemporary urban capitalism has metamorphosed (Borja & Castells 1997; Harvey 1989). Indeed, the document itself at one point cautionary warns that the new legislation could be seen to 'divide grassroot organizations' by opening up a space of confrontation between community associations whose interests were once deployed over formerly distinctive catchment areas (1998: 19).

All of the proposals contained in the plan seem therefore focused on opening up the city's space, on clearing and cleaning the built environment (central parks, a new arrangement for densely settled administrative districts) and designing a spacious new geography that will present no difficulty should one wish to move transversally across the city (industrial corridors, freight transport systems, the littoral as a recreational avenue). It should not come as a surprise, then, to find out that between 1997 and 1999 alone the Town Hall commissioned four transport studies of the city's infrastructure and spatial layout (Gubbins 1999; Senda 1998; Suroeste 1998; Testing 1997).

Idioms of space and movement were in fact the terms employed by town planners and urban developers to explain their visions of the city to me.³ The architects and planners whom I met had often attended postgraduate courses abroad (Barcelona was a favourite destination) and repeatedly contrasted Antofagasta's urban environment with the cosmopolitanism of Barcelona or Paris. The city was viewed as being isolated, and this isolation operated on two fronts: on the one hand, Antofagasta was a marginal location at both a national and international level – it suffered from Santiago's (i.e. the government's) politics of centralism, and suffered also from its neglected geographical location in the desert. At another level, the city itself was oblivious to its own historical legacy and made very little of its 'beautiful' coastal location and the 'spiritualness' of the desert. Antofagasta lived *de espaldas al desierto* (giving its back to the desert), and this, the planners argued, was in no small measure a cause of its alienation. The city thus needed to 'reconnect' itself: to the world and to its landscape of historical heritage. The idioms of connectedness were images of flows: flows of people, of goods, services and ideas, moving in and out of the city, thus allowing the city to overcome its territorial marginalisation. In an important sense this idea about freedom of movement was also said to be necessary for the city to 'breathe out', and in a number of occasions people spoke to me about the need to 'oxygenate the city'. Strange though it may seem, the free circulation of people and air were strong elements in the call for creating an identity to the city, and in 1997 the Town Hall run an advertising campaign that read '*Su ciudad no es suciedad*' (Your Town is not the same as Dirt, a word-game that played on the phonetic similarity between the capitalized words). Freedom of circulation (of air and

people) thus became an emblem of progress, standing in stark of opposition to the polluting ills of spatial immobility.

Architects at the School of Architecture of the Universidad Católica del Norte expressed some ambivalence at this vision and wondered why Victor Gubbins, the consultant guru leading the city's redevelopment programme, had to be appointed from outside the city. One architect put his hesitation as follows:

I am not persuaded by this vision to open up the city to the world. We are the world's largest exporter of copper! We are already connected to the world! What we need is to open up spaces *within* the city. We need, for instance, to eliminate the extreme spatial division of the city [rich south, poor north], to integrate the various communities and weave a proper urban fabric.

Within or outwith the city, the language of connectedness of architects and town planners speaks of the city's self-awareness about its growth and development, where these are always represented in spatial terms (cosmopolitanism, global economic flows, urban segregation, pollution and the circulation of air, etc.). The AIA, the Town Hall and the developers' vision of change thus emerges as a vision of transparent economic and human linkages, both local and transnational. Policy makers, planners and industrialists speak of the city in terms of the economic role reserved for her in the overarching theatre of political economy. (Victor Gubbins once spoke of the need to think the urban in terms of 'cities-as-firms' (Moreno J. 21 May 1999).) The city's space is conceived as devoid of any qualities or depth (save in the accounts of some local architects). It is a *tabula rasa*,

where Capital can unfold unrestrained and make spatial choices – where to site a factory, upon which rural land will the city spread, which tracks to asphalt, where to site Exponor, where to build ‘green areas’ – solely upon the basis of exchange values and transport costs (Cf. Harvey 1985). Transparency and space, then, become idioms of political economy, and their effectiveness at making the ‘city’ an operational agency is measured in terms of the ‘connections’ they facilitate: to the past (mining history), to the present (mining industry), and to the future (mining destiny).

Cultural economy: the politics of identity

In quite a different fashion, the idea of transparency has become a substantive concern of a different scale of economy: the local cultural heritage and identity industry. Here, the work of transparency is that of making visible and available the region’s cultural patrimony. This cultural economy has been fundamental in raising and building an urban self-consciousness about the importance of the desert’s capitalist economy in the formation of a regional identity and thus in helping re-evaluate the historical contribution of the region to Chile’s twentieth century nation-building project. (This identity is expressed in the self-designations *nortino* and/or *pampino*, that is, inhabitants of northern Chile and/or the nitrate desert.) Two key players have been involved in this project, often in a joint effort: the regional authorities and the local industrialists’ association.

The regional authorities involvement in the cultural economy gained momentum in the early 1990s. In 1990 the regional government drafted a new strategy for regional development, the *Estrategia Regional de Desarrollo de la II Región* (Regional Strategy for the Development of the II Region). Three years later it was noted that the strategy

lacked an identity charter. A new meeting was then organized under the name of *Encuentro con nuestra Identidad* (Encounter with our Identity). The occasion was momentous; the scale of the project, quite extraordinary. To mention but a few instances: the regional government commissioned from the Instituto Profesional José Santos Ossa, IPJSO (a Higher Education College), the elaboration of a working proposal, a copy of which was then distributed to the various regional municipalities so that they could familiarize themselves with its contents; prior to the actual encounter, the Regional Secretary for Planning and Coordination set meetings with community organizations across the region to inform of and increase awareness of the project; during the encounter itself, 600 people participated in 19 workshops, each coordinated by a representative of the regional government, presided by a Secretary, and monitored by an observer appointed by IPJSO. After the event, most networks remained in place and ‘in touch’, for it was decided to leave the consultation process open-ended. The complex of networks and partnerships that the identity-project thus activated became a form of ‘cultural work’ in its own right, one that would in turn become a recurrent feature of the local cultural economy throughout the 1990s.

As for the work of the local industrialists, this has often been philanthropic in kind and with a fondness for historiographical projects. The Corporación Pro Antofagasta, ProA (Pro Antofagasta Corporation), for instance, a non governmental organization run by some of the city’s most prominent empresarios (as it happens, the corporation shares its office premises with the Chilean Construction Chamber), has in the past funded the publication of books on the history of the city none of which, incidentally, deals with post-1940 events (González Pizarro 2003; Panadés Vargas & González Pizarro 1998;

ProA 1995). The local authorities themselves have taken up too the History-Identity couplet and re-edited a famous 1930 book on the history of Antofagasta (Arce 1930). Much work has also been done on the subject of the region's identity by all three local universities (1991a; 1991b; Gómez Parra & Lehnert 1993; Trabucco 1993), funded by FONDECYT (a state programme for research in education, science and technology), FNDR (National Fund for Regional Development) or the regional government itself. The private sector has also partaken of such research, following ProA's lead, by funding similar investigations on local identity, as has been the case with Minera Escondida, now a habitual benefactor of IPJSO.

A third version of these cultural heritage efforts is what have come to be known as 'nitrate remembrances' or 'saltpetre nostalgias'. These are cultural festivals which generally take place over one or two days to commemorate the 'golden times' of saltpetre mining in the desert, the *Festival de Chacabuco* being a notable example. The festival is a biannual *pampa* revival celebration that takes place in the former nitrate refinery of Chacabuco (itself a National Heritage site). In 1999, the festival hosted the following activities: a function of *La Reina Isabel Cantaba Racheras*, a theatrical adaptation of the novel of the same title by Hernán Rivera Letelier (a famous national novelist, former nitrate worker); the exhibitions 'A History of Saltpetre' and 'Painting the Region'; the presentation of *La Cantata de Santa María de Iquique*, a short musical that commemorates the 1907 labour massacre; and performances by *murgas* (brass bands) from various former nitrate refineries. People turn up to these occasions dressed up in period clothes (from the 1920-30s); the sites display wonderful collections of photographs and memorabilia (old radios, gramophones, *fichas* (the tokens in which

nitrate workers received their payments), posters, old clothes and shoes); and the listing of live acts includes performances by Andean folkloric bands, *caporales* and *diabladas* (popular religious groups).

My argument here is that all such efforts (the draft of an Identity charter, corporate philanthropy, the nitrate nostalgias) hide an economy, and that this is especially prominent in the way the notion of ‘history’ is used. History and Identity are mobilized for particular purposes and towards particular effects. In Antofagasta in the 1990s these idioms were made available as a particular capitalist version of modernity. Thus, at one point the 1993 identity charter says:

To train the local workforce, so that it can join the region’s industry and mining, is a priority line of action, for the feeling of belonging to the region requires a labour market strong enough to guarantee access to adequate standards of living. The high numbers of foreigners in the mining industry underscores the extent to which the sense of unrootedness is an obstacle to a Regional Identity. For this reason, it is a fundamental responsibility of businessmen, in their roles as constitutive actors of our region, to engage, with great prominence, in our region’s economic present and future (1994: 20).

That the region’s identity passes through the prior recognition of its ‘mining destiny’ is an idea that has since been pushed forth by different means (and, of course, that resonates with the AIA Director’s words of a vision for the city). It is most explicitly stated in the Regional Minister’s preface to the document: ‘to invest in Identity is to

invest in a future for the region... the *Identity has to be assumed as a regional resource upon which a competitive advantage must be developed*' (1994: 6, emphasis added). But it can also be found in the media's coverage of every Exponor fair, in the repertoire of Minera Escondida's philanthropic activities, in the Town Hall's own *Plan de Desarrollo Comunal*, in the various ways through which the necessity of the *megapuerto* project is publicly expressed, etc. A telling example of this symbiosis between history and the future, identity and the modern, is found in Revista Megapuerto, a magazine for 'executives' set up to promote the development of the harbour at Mejillones. The magazine is essentially a vehicle for advertising the region at large, celebrating and exalting its marks of progress and growth. In this sense, it is a privileged window to the industrialists' and businessmen vision of what modernity consists of and how the road towards it should be paved. In one of the magazine's earliest numbers we find an article about 'The miner, pillar of our wealth':

Here [in Chile's northern provinces] the miner is all but one, he is an all-encompassing way of thinking and behaving. He is the totality of his children, wives, parents, of fellow miners that share a distinctive outlook on life... for there runs, in the blood of all of them, perhaps, a different substance. A dose of energy, of tenacity, of ferrous willingness, that transcends and identifies the northern miner. (1997: 23)

The same issue contains articles on the 'copper man', a mummy of a presumed pre-Hispanic indigenous copper miner found in Chuquicamata, and the silver melting plant of Huanchaca, founded in 1892 and Antofagasta's first industrial establishment.

For all its ingenuity, the association between identity, labour and capital has been most fruitful in validating a particular reading and view of what regional history and modernity are all about. But this is just another scale through which ideas about change are being deployed; so let me change scales again and turn now to another local discourse on modernity, this one entangled in visions of consumption and, again, a historical regional identity.

Culture: consumption and history

The debate on what it is the meaning of ‘modernity’ in Latin America and in what terms can the continent embrace the concept has generated a vast amount of literature (in relation to Chile alone see, for example, Brunner 1988; Brunner 1994; Cuevas et al. 1995; García Canclini 1990; Larraín Ibáñez 1996; Morandé 1994; Parker 1990; Parker 1993). It is most interesting that the discussion of the concept, as it is formulated in most of these texts, revolves at the same time around the idea of ‘cultural identity’. Here I am not directly concerned with such issues but shall focus my argument instead on the specific meanings conferred to both terms – modernity and identity – in Antofagasta by a number of ‘cultural agents’ and the wider urban community. The analysis, however, does relate to the aforementioned literature in that, as it will be seen, both concepts are ultimately made to work together within a broader cultural continuum. In Antofagasta, such a continuum has been modelled on images of growth and progress, and the mythology, in Barthes’ sense (1957), of urban development, regional history, and consumption.

Probably the strongest meaning of ‘modernity’ in Antofagasta in the late 1990s applied to its use over specific city developments in particular, and notions of urbanity and growth in general. Modernity became a default descriptor to characterise all changes in the urban landscape, whether it be the construction of a new beach resort (3 October 1999), a recreational addition to the city’s leiscapescape (26 November 1999), or the arrival of McDonalds in Antofagasta (25 May 2000). This latest of developments, the McDonaldization of Antofagasta, was even given a ‘modern’ voice by the town’s mayor in a recent internet contribution (Araya 10 June 2000).

The McDonaldization of Antofagasta took place in 2001 and was accompanied by the arrival of other national fast food chains. These accelerated the transformation of the city’s public spaces into landscapes of consumption, a move that was promoted by both empresarios, the local authorities and opinion-makers. A year after the national chain of supermarkets Líder arrived in the city, El Mercurio de Antofagasta published a small weekend supplement dedicated to the store. The newspaper hailed the arrival of the store in the following terms: ‘Líder is endorsing the region’s development... they are expanding the retailing area of the megamarket with a modern infrastructure that will help consolidate the ‘mall’ concept for the establishment.’ (27 November 1999)

The reference to the supermarket’s redefinition as a ‘mall concept’ echoed with the regional government and town hall’s vision of the city centre as a place of consumption: In 1999 the Committee for the Renewal of Antofagasta’s Urban Core made a specific recommendation in its final report to ‘enhance the role of the Old City as an Open Mall’ (1999). In this vision, then, modernity appears as a project of urban change carried forth in the language, landscape and aesthetics of consumption (Cf. Sack 1988).⁴

This association of modernity to consumption, urban progress and development, does not only take place at the level of sweeping generalizations, on the part of policy makers, or powerful ideological discourses, on the part of capitalist agents. Everyday talk is imbued too of similar idioms. When asked where in Chile would they rather live (it is almost taken for granted that most people do not like living in Antofagasta), most of my informants and friends came up with the same answers: Iquique, La Serena or Valparaíso/Viña del Mar. These are Chile's most important tourist resorts, buoyant and fervent cities where one can always find things to do – unlike Antofagasta, the average script reads, which is *fome*, boring, still, almost predictable.

The narrative on the city's passiveness is interesting for it fits with the authorities' identity problem. Many people in Antofagasta feel ostracized and frustrated, inhabitants of a peripheral territory that contributes to the national economy way in excess of what it gets back. The historical landscape of wealth of the Atacama Desert is both celebrated and despised – people are grateful to the desert for its hidden mineral wealth, but they also express contempt for the territory because of its harshness and isolation. The desert figures prominently in the imagination of the city: people are constantly referring to the dryness of the land, complaining about the city's dusty and dirty streets. Metaphors and figures of transitoriness are used throughout to describe the city's environment: for well over a hundred years now, stray dogs have recurrently appeared as a concern of the local population, pointing to the ephemerality of the land, where people come and go and only the animals stay (13 May 2002; 1926; May 1924: 13-14). The city itself is known by all as a *ciudad flotante* (floating city), by which it is meant a place where people come to make money and then leave, disappointed by the grimness of life in the desert.

Historically, the problem of Antofagasta has been that of holding life in the desert, of providing the structures to, in the words of the AIA director, make it a 'more livable city'. This historical deficiency is also often rehearsed in terms of the political geography of the country. In this narrative, Antofagasta figures as a peripheral enclave, a source of wealth that is never enjoyed locally. Chile's historical politics of centralism is here invoked to legitimate a story about Antofagasta's sacrifice to the nation.

These are the challenges of 'modernity' in Antofagasta, and it is against this historical background that the process of urban change, as it is interpreted and played out by all urban actors, must be understood (Corsín Jiménez 2003). In appraising the city's hospitality, for instance, many Antofagastinos draw comparisons with another desert city, Iquique. Iquique is located some 600km north from Antofagasta and is seat to the Tarapacá regional government. The city boasts a casino and the Zofri (Zona Franca de Iquique), a free trade area that has become an emblem for the city and a paradise of consumption for all Northerners. It is not uncommon for people living in Antofagasta to leave early in the morning for Iquique in order to buy at the Zofri (that is, consumer durables that will render worthwhile a 12 hour return trip) and make their way back in the evening. People talk wonders about Iquique: about its many restaurants and cafes, the variety and size of its nightclubs, its beautiful coastal promenade and the architecture of the old city, etc., developments all that relate to the cityscape and its infrastructure. All in all, it is noteworthy that many of the terms and images that the Antofagastinos employ to characterise the city emphasize its disconnectivity. The city, it is argued, is disconnected from the centres of economic growth (Santiago), or from leisure and commercial centres (Iquique, Viña, La Serena); from the world's capitals of architecture and

cosmopolitanism (Barcelona, Paris), and from its own landscape of historical heritage (the nitrate past). The city is even disconnected from itself, as when people characterise and blame their fellow citizens for *no estar ni ahí* (meaning not to be somewhere, not to care about what happens where one is). People's deprecatory attitude towards the city makes the city as object disappear, leaving one only with dirt and pollution and (desert) dust.

One should handle some of these images with care, though. The discourse of enviousness towards Iquique or La Serena or Viña, for instance, is deceiving. Antofagasta has the second highest income per capita in the country, next only to Santiago. Moreover, in October 1999, the national newspaper La Tercera published a report in which it placed Antofagasta third on the list of the country's cities with the highest standards of living (albeit first came Iquique, it must be said). The city's quietness can at times certainly be despairing, particularly for the youth, but it can also be a blessing, as I was told on many occasions by groups of middle class parents, who often praised the city as a wonderful place to bring up a family – peaceful and with a friendly environment.

One can therefore see that double standards (different scales) are used to appraise the city. The young are inclined to look outwards for excitement: to Santiago, or Viña or Iquique. For them, these are 'modern' cities. Many university students, for example, look to Santiago, or even Spain, to further their education with postgraduate courses (like the architects I mentioned earlier). They need to *salir fuera*, get out of the region, and sometimes the country for which the former stands, to keep up to date, to seize the opportunities which are open to them 'out there'. And this regardless of the fact that

many, that is Chileans from other provinces or even neighbouring South Americans, are desperate to ‘make it in’, for Antofagasta has probably the most buoyant of the region’s labour markets. Modernity, for all these people, has an association with professional training and career development, with economic growth and prosperity, with access to credit and consumption. It is a life-project that scales out from Antofagasta’s suffocating marginal location in Chile’s northern periphery – but we have already seen that this assessment by my informants of the scale of modernity is of course already framed within another scale of sorts: Chile’s politics of centralization and its disregard for the provinces (Angell et al. 2001).

There is yet another version of modernity, construed around ideas of security and safety, a peaceful and friendly environment. This is the notion of modernity that many middle class families sustain. Built into these ideas are of course further presuppositions and beliefs as to what modern urban life is all about. The urban landscape of consumption, of which the mall is in this context its most representative example, stands as the paradigmatic friendly and modern environment. The Líder megamarket shrewdly presents itself as a family environment – a ‘mall’ that caters for the recreational needs of the whole family. (Supermarkets were in fact some of the city’s most prominent spaces of leisure and recreation, especially for family outings, during the period of fieldwork.) This version of modernity is therefore in no small measure constructed out, and contributes to, the local ideology of the family – a different scale of measurement altogether. In this account, a modern city is a city that works towards raising the standards of living of the family, and of children and women in particular.

When asked, people often associated their supermarket outings to the nitrate remembrance events. Supermarkets, like the nitrate festivals, have ‘opened up’ a space for the recreation and entertainment of the family (Corsín Jiménez 2003). People seek spaces where they can reproduce the ideology of the family and its values, and in this sense both nitrate revival festivals (i.e. history) and the urban landscape of consumption (i.e. modernity) play a functional and much appreciated role. Like in the architects and city planners’ usage, the idiom of ‘space’ is evoked here to mark a capacity for action. ‘Space’ has become a vehicle for the expression of the values of consumerism, family life, and a sense of participating in a larger urban community, one inflected by the air of modernity. So this form of agency, although no doubt penetrated by political economy too, mobilises different meanings, aspirations and effects of what it means to be modern.

Modernity, consumption and history, we have seen, are held together by the imagery of labour and labour identity. The symbol of the miner (Labour) has become a repository for both family values *and* projects of further capitalist expansion, such as the *megapuerto* complex at Mejillones. The historical work and sacrifice that the nitrate miners put into the development of the region is today remembered in cultural events (saltpetre nostalgias) and cultural productions (the edition of books and musical recordings on the history of the region) that are sponsored and funded by the local authorities and capitalist agents. As such, the ‘nitrate family’ (a term used to refer to the historical community of nitrate miners) can be seen to mediate and reconcile the ambiguities and tensions of what modernity stands for. Another example: The enlargement of the pit mine at Chuquicamata will soon reach the town, which is therefore already in the process of being relocated to neighbouring Calama. CODELCO, the state

company owner of the mining operations, has promised to leave a testimony of some sort that will speak of the encampment that once stood there. There is talk of building a museum of mining in Calama. Capitalism and progress, in this view, take place at the expense of history, indeed one could almost say that they erase history. Which is why modernity is therefore re-signified as the reassertion of identity – via the construction of a museum (Urrutia M. 27 November 1999). Capitalism erases history yet enables the emergence of History. Different scales, in sum, are mobilised to different effects.

Conclusion: scales of change

This article has attempted to show that there is no place where one can locate ‘modernity’, and in this sense that it might be wiser to do without the term. People all over the world no doubt speak about and use the term ‘modernity’, but the scale of the changes they envisage is almost always of a different kind, for the kind of scales they employ to make sense of ‘change’ are indeed of a different kind to start with.

My analysis of urban change in Antofagasta is in no small measure an analysis of the forcefulness of political economy in reshaping local lives. But political economy works in different ways at different levels of sociality, and it is important to keep these changes of scale in mind. In my account, I have opted for adopting three scales of analysis: political economy, cultural economy, and culture, yet I hope too to have given a sense of the language and scales that the people of Antofagasta themselves use to make sense and engage with these changes. Of significance amongst these are: the political vision of the city’s ‘mining destiny’; the cultural politics of identity, and its place in the expansionist projects of capital, with special reference to the mining industry; the place of history and

the re-evaluation of the region's nitrate past in the making of a local identity; the semantic possibilities of the language of space, used alike by town planners and city dwellers to project their own visions of modernity; a historicist reflection on the nation's politics of centralism; and a programme for family values, supported mainly on the ideology and practices of consumption.

Some of the discourses rehearsed by the Antofagastinos are no doubt pervasive, one is tempted to say that they cross scales: consumption is one such discourse (Cf. Miller 1995); the historical contribution of labour to the region's economy and identity, another. This is not to say that modernity is located and plays out from within them, but that they realise with greater effect a vision of change for the city. We may call these effective changes 'expressions of modernity', but this is all the heuristic value the concept will afford us. The notion of modernity says nothing of the scale of the changes (save that they took place), nor of the scales that were mobilized to bring them about. It says nothing of the precise bodies of knowledge that were brought to bear upon, and brought consequentiality to the changes. This complex articulation of different scales is in fact what the term 'modernity' first came to designate when it appeared in the late 14th century. Then, the teaching of philosophy and theology in universities started to differentiate between a *via antiqua* and a *via moderna*, and traditional religious exercises where opposed to what became known as *devotio moderna* (Ortega y Gasset 1956: 120, 311). A new *mode* (thence, the 'modern') of thinking about the world emerged where bodies of knowledge (astronomy, medicine, philosophy, etc.) previously nested hierarchically in relationship to the supreme authority of God (and theology) thereafter became independent of, yet related to one another in seemingly complex and fascinating

ways. Modernity, in other words, articulated the realisation of the complex relationships of scales that made up the world.

My reference to Ortega y Gasset's analysis of the emergence of Galilean modernity aims not at reproducing it but, rather, to note how particular ideas at particular conjunctures mobilize their own vehicles of expression. Before the Copernican/Galilean revolution, Man lied between God and Nature; knowledge resided at either side of him, not within him. The emergence of Reason as an organon of man's intelligence, however, changed this, placing knowledge not outside Man (in Nature, or in God's omniscience) but at the very heart of his cognitive faculties. Reason *scaled out* Man's place in the universe by making Man (not Nature, not God) a central element in the organization of knowledge. Ortega y Gasset captures it beautifully when he says that the Galilean perspective *magnified* the size of Man in the universe (Ortega y Gasset 1956: 240). The new knowledge resized the scales through which Man became available to himself.

What I borrow from Ortega y Gasset, then, is not his understanding or definition of modernity but his vision of the workings of knowledge; how the concept of knowledge moves in and out of 'change' as a way of making certain changes in knowledge visible, or of expressing knowledge (i.e. awareness) of change. In other words, how knowledge scales itself out. In this article I have attempted to outline some of the scales through which the modern world is put to work as a vision of change in the city of Antofagasta. Here, as elsewhere, the concept of modernity may speak to us about people's attitude to and aspirations for change. But the concept serves little more than a heuristic purpose, for it points to complexity but does not elucidate it. When it comes to change, it is far more useful to know which scales connect with which scales, and why.

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NOTES

¹ A not too dissimilar reading has been offered by Eric Hirsch, for whom modernity in Melanesia emerges as a historical unique set of connections: between political (state) power and various kinds of persons (Hirsch 2001). But I believe the resemblance between our approaches is formal, not substantive, for I am still not persuaded that modernity is something ‘out there’.

² One should not be misled by the AIA’s acronym. Antofagasta’s is a *service* economy – there is very little industry in the city, and what there is, is small-scale and economically unimportant. The city services the mining industry, which is located in the desert’s hinterland, hundreds of kilometres away from the city. The AIA in fact favours the de-industrialisation or ‘tertiarisation’ of the city (not that the city was ever industrialised anyway), because only with a strong service-support structure will the city be in a position to provision the desert (industrial) economy. Also, the AIA, though a local consortium in character, is participated by both local, national and international firms; its membership includes both industrial and service firms. The point being that foreign mining corporations like Minera Escondida have as much interest in the consolidation of Antofagasta’s service profile as do local financiers. A point can be made about how local

idioms about urban change ('space', 'pollution', 'history', which are all explored later on in the article) are being pressed into the service of this tertiary sector-led political economy.

³ From 1997 to 2002 I met with and interviewed a number of city planners and architects, who expounded their projects and proposals for the city to me. In 1999 I spent the year at the School of Architecture of the Universidad Catolica del Norte, Antofagasta, as visiting lecturer in the anthropology of human environments.

⁴ Antofagasta is not unlike other Chilean cities in this respect. It is with this in mind that Eugenio Tironi, writing on the sociological changes undergone by Chile in the past decade, says: 'If we were to put it in a few words, the decade of the 90s has been the decade of the outburst of the masses. In lakes and malls, in restaurants and beaches, in airports and cinemas, we find the multitudes spreading over all possible spaces... [in] the form of consumers' (Tironi Barrios 1999: 16) And along the same lines, Tomás Moulian remarks how 'everyday culture in contemporary Chile is penetrated by the symbolism of consumption' and describes the mall as 'the pathos of consumption' (Moulian 1997: 106, 114). Marco Antonio De la Parra summarizes the emergence of consumerism in Chile thus: 'I plunged into my family, I submerged into my marriage, I accepted that commendatory re-evaluation of the private world where we all hid during those first years. I understood what many did: transvestite into pragmatics, impassioned with that sole spiritual rest that the dictatorship was to supply us with: consumerism.' (De la Parra 1997: 46)

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